

Enigmatic figures from central Italy

Guy Bradley

Lots of people have heard of the Etruscans, but what about the Piceni or the Vestini? These peoples of early Italy remain little known outside the scholarly world. Recent archaeological investigation into the territory of the Samnites, the most redoubtable enemy faced by Rome in the Italian peninsula, and of related people in the north has led to some sensational discoveries. One example is the major cemeteries of the Marsi and Vestini in the Appennines, east of Rome. But the most extraordinary aspect of these newly-appreciated peoples is the rich tradition of monumental sculpture in Picenum, which featured in major international exhibition under the title *The Picenes: A European People*.

Enigmatic statues

At their most abstract, the statues of the Picenes consist of great slabs of limestone, cut into a roughly human shape or into tall pillars with little anatomic detail. The most famous examples are a series of stelae found by chance in a cemetery at Penna Sant'Andrea, about halfway down the Adriatic coast. Their only physical details are haunting, mask-like faces, although notches suggest that they may also have carried some sort of headgear. The main parts of the stelae are made up of carefully incised texts in a language known as 'South Picene'. These texts, dating from the first half of the fifth century B.C., have yet to be fully deciphered but they are thought to mention a community of Sabines or Samnites and their aristocratic leaders. The appearance of the texts may be as important as their meaning: in the ancient world writing in itself was commonly a source of prestige.

Other statues, also carved with great care from local limestone, are more straightforwardly figurative – and, curiously, appear to have been made earlier than the more abstract ones. The so-called 'Capestrano Warrior' is the best known, so well known in fact that it is now the mascot of the Abruzzo region, reproductions cropping up everywhere from children's murals to tourist nicknacks. It was found in 1934 along with a broken piece of a similar, female, statue in another cemetery. With the exception of the curious 'sombbrero' helmet the statue is complete, and at over 2 m. high retains the striking visual impact that must have been intended by its sculptor. The face on the statue may be a mask; the body is surprisingly curvaceous for a masculine figure. His strapping holds a cuirass disc to his chest, a typical adornment of central Appennine warriors. Its early form suggests that the sculpture was executed around 550 B.C. (earlier, as we have noted, than the type found at Penna Sant'Andrea). The warrior is armed with the short sword (gladius), which later became a feared part of the Romans' armoury. His right hand holds an axe (for sacrifice or fighting?), and his military credentials are reinforced by a pair of spears carved into the pilasters either side of the statue. A South Picene inscription on its side has been interpreted as: 'My beautiful image was made by Aninis for the king Nevius Pompuledeius'. There is little doubt that the warrior represents a man of high status, very probably a king.

Cultural links

These outstanding examples from Picenum are part of a tradition that was common to all the peoples of the central Adriatic, a district far removed from the more cosmopolitan world of Rome and the Etruscan cities. Nevertheless, the idea of such sculpture is probably borrowed from Etruria, where the earliest statues were the work of Near Eastern artists. Particularly close parallels are offered by a pair of figures from Casale Marittimo near Pisa, unearthed in 1987, but not published until 1999. Dating to the mid seventh century, these are the oldest statues known from anywhere in Italy, and display a strikingly similar pose to the Capestrano warrior. However, central Adriatic sculpture is more than a mere off-shoot of Etruscan practice. The setting up of uncarved standing stones to mark graves had taken place since the Bronze Age in cemeteries like Fossa, where each tumulus is marked by a line of stones increasing in height, and it is a short step to the creation of the stelae of Penna Sant'Andrea.

Picenum and the other peoples of the central Adriatic area also had close cultural links to mainland Europe (in contrast to the Mediterranean orientation of Etruria and Rome). Similar types of statues were used to represent the aristocratic dead in the so-called Halstatt period of the European early iron age, such as the figure with an erect penis from Hirschlanden, dated to the second half of the sixth century, and the Glauberg warrior, sporting more strange headgear, of the fifth century B.C. Like those of Halstatt warriors, central Adriatic statues may have stood at the centre of burial tumuli. They have generally been interpreted as representations of the dead, but could also be ancestors of the deceased, who we know often featured in Etruscan and Roman tombs and funerary processions. Whoever they represent, they are clearly designed to show off the power and wealth of commissioners like Nevius Pompuledeius, at a time when these societies were undergoing dramatic changes. The relative equality of Bronze Age graves, presumably reflecting a relatively egalitarian society, seems to have been destabilised by the seaborne trade of the Orientalizing period (c. 720 – c. 580 B.C.). In this era increasing contacts between the Eastern and Western Mediterranean appear to have spread not only the luxury items known from tombs across Italy but also a whole new aristocratic way of life focused on a competitive struggle for prestige.

Archaic Europeans

Our enigmatic statues, then, provide precious evidence for a very interesting period in Mediterranean history, when all sorts of long distance interchange was going on, and when distant lands seem to have shared common cultural traits in ways which had little to do with national allegiances. The significance of this period and its products both for local pride and for European integration has not been lost on the politicians who enthusiastically sponsor cultural events celebrating it: the 'committee of honour' of *The Picenes: A European People* included Romano Prodi (President of the European Commission), Massimo D'Alema (the Italian Prime Minister), as well as leading figures of the Marche and Abruzzo regions.

Such objects are also important for us as students of history because they shed light on the peoples conquered by the

Romans. Roman authors like Livy tend either to ignore the Samnites, Picenes and their neighbours, or to regard them as savage opponents of the extension of Roman civilisation. These remarkable new discoveries help us put these cultures in their rightful place amongst archaic Mediterranean civilisations, of which the eventual victor, Rome, was at this time by no means the most important.

For information on the Picenes exhibition, see http://www.archart.it/archart/mostre_archeo/piceni3.htm.

For the Halstatt figures, see

<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/~umw8f/Barbarians/first.html>

Guy Bradley teaches archaeology and ancient history at the University of Wales, Cardiff.